

2015-2016 – A Celebration of the Montgomery Philharmonic’s 10th Anniversary Season

Concert 2 – December 13, 2015 With the Central Maryland Choral

Debussy | Poulenc | Handel

About Claude Debussy –

Debussy was the oldest of five children. His father was the owner of a Paris china shop and his mother was a seamstress. During the Franco-Prussian war, Debussy’s mother fled with him to his paternal aunt’s home in Cannes. It was there that Debussy began to study piano. His aunt paid for these lessons. At age 10, Debussy entered the Paris Conservatory, and he spent the next 11 years studying piano, organ, and composition.

Often, Debussy did not follow instructions at the conservatory and he challenged his teachers’ rigid instruction. He was known to be argumentative and experimental. He was also a brilliant pianist and known to be an outstanding sight-reader on the piano and the organ. Given this, Debussy could have chosen the path of a professional pianist, yet he chose to be a composer. In 1884, at the age of 22, he won the Prix du Rome—the most important composition prize at the time. He then spent 3 years at the Académie des Beaux-Arts living at the Villa Medici to further his composition studies. Debussy was miserable, however, and found Italian opera and symphonic music at the time to be dreadful. In 1885, he wrote a letter explaining that he wanted to follow his own path. He submitted pieces for examination by the Académie and was reprimanded for being too unusual.

Claude Debussy, along with Maurice Ravel, was known as one of most notable composers of Impressionistic music even though he disliked the term when it applied to his music. In fact, the very components of Impressionistic art apply directly to Debussy’s music. The details of a Monet painting, with its array of colors and the small fragments within each painting, make up a magnificent, complete work. The listener finds these very details in Debussy’s music. The layers of complexity create the magnificent whole.

Born: August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died: March 25, 1918, Paris, France

Full Name: Claude-Achille Debussy

Compositions: 7 major orchestral works, 4 ballets, 17 works for soloist and orchestra, 7 chamber works, 31 works and collections for piano, 8 works for 4 hands or 2 pianos, 59 works or collections for voice and piano

Gigues from *Images pour orchestre* (1909–1912) – Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Gigues is one of three sections from *Images pour orchestre* that Debussy wrote between 1905 and 1912. He wrote *Gigues* from *Images pour orchestre* in remembrance of the time that he spent in England, using two songs that he learned while there—“Dansons la gigue” by Charles Bordes and the Tyneside folk tune “*The Keel Row*”—as inspiration for the piece.

In an effort to free music from barren traditions, Debussy enlisted a series of strange (at the time) and wondrous elements: modality, with its primary intervals (octaves, fourths, and fifths) used in parallel motion, conjured an archaic effect; the whole-tone scale of the Far East eliminated the need for traditional major/minor cadences; similarly, the pentatonic (five-note) scale evoked further exoticism; enriched chord structures acted as independent entities, requiring the audience to listen with more open ears.

In *Gigues*, Debussy uses the colors of both the woodwind and brass sections to bring the complexities of rhythm layers and harmonies to life. The oboe section colors are fully exploited with the use of not only two oboes, but also the English horn and the oboe d’amore. This rare combination extends the range of the oboe and brings out the various color combinations in the solo work that is orchestrated. In the flute section, it should be noted that Debussy chose the colors of two piccolos and two flutes. Debussy uses the horn and string sections to bring a certain mellowness to the piece and then turns on a dime to add the trumpets to these two sections. These combined brass and string sections create a flowing power in the middle section of *Gigues*. Like *La Mer*, a piece composed just prior to *Images pour orchestre*, Debussy carefully put sounds in the percussion section that are new to the early 20th century audience. The sonic quality of the added percussion adds to the minutia in a piece that sounds simple but, at the same time, daringly complex.

Instrumentation – 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in Bb, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets in C, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

Artifacts –

Leonard Bernstein’s score of *Gigues*.

<http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/9322ac25-98ba-40a4-838b-38e9334f9b4a/fullview#page/1/mode/2up>


1. Images: I. Gigues - City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra & Sir Simon Rattle
2. Debussy: Images; Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune; Printemps - Cleveland Orchestra & Pierre Boulez
3. The Leonard Bernstein Collection - Volume 1 - Pt. 4 - Leonard Bernstein

1. Images in Full Score (Dover Music Scores)
2. Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary (Unlocking the Masters Series No. 13)
3. Debussy Letters
4. Debussy:Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, Images Pour Orchestre; Printemps (Suite Symphonique)
5. Debussy: La Mer; Images; Nocturnes etc. (2 CDs)
6. Images for Orchestra, L. 122: No. 1, Gigues

YouTube Video Links –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi1HyJiVHzg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj8D5KUQ8e8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEuthJdqVLQ>